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ABSTRACT

In response to a projected enrollment decline for spring 1995, Burlington County College, in New Jersey, offered "Power Package" courses, or 11, 45-hour courses held over 3 weekends, to attract more credit students. In response to questions regarding the academic validity of these alternative courses, the college undertook a study to evaluate their effectiveness. Data were collected from a telephone survey of 91 of the 185 students who took a weekend course, college records on student characteristics and grades, surveys of faculty, student course evaluations, and in-class surveys of students administered by faculty. An analysis of responses revealed the following: (1) women comprised 59% of the students enrolled, while minority students comprised 22%; (2) 89% of the students indicated that they would enroll in another Power Package course, but only 11% had done so as of summer 1996; (3) 7 of the 8 instructors surveyed said that they would teach another course, while 8 of all 11 instructors have done so; (4) 44% of the students indicated that they had learned the same amount in the courses as they would have in traditional courses, while 43% thought that they had learned more; and (5) 66% of the students responded that there was more student and instructor interaction in the weekend courses than in regular courses. The student and faculty survey instruments are appended. (TGI)

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Power Package:
An Alternative to Traditional Course Scheduling

by

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Paper presented at the Consortium for Community College Development's Annual Summer Institute (8th, Charleston, SC, June 23-26, 1996)

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Power Package: An Alternative to Traditional Course Scheduling

Paper Used in Presentation
at the Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success in the Community College

8th Annual Summer Institute
of the Consortium for Community College Development
June 23-26

Burlington County College
Robert C. Messina, Jr., President
Alice C. Fagans, Executive Director, Research, Planning & Assessment
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Introduction

In early December 1994, the staff at Burlington County College (BCC) were alerted to a marked decrease in enrollment for the spring 1995 semester. The projections warned of a potential 20 percent decline from the prior year's spring enrollment. The college administration decided to move quickly to try to remedy this situation. They generated an idea to offer credit courses in a variety of ways to attract students whose schedules may preclude them from enrolling in courses offered during more traditional time-frames. These alternative classes became known as the "Power Package." College administrators hoped this program would attract new students for the spring 1995 semester. They also expected that this program would help current students to graduate "on time," and would demonstrate flexibility to all students.

One configuration of these alternative classes were the "three week-ends for three credits" courses. Students attend class for 45 hours. Fifteen hours are spread over each week-end: Fridays from 6-9:30 p.m., Saturdays from 8 a.m. - noon and 1-4:30 p.m., and Sundays from 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. This configuration attracted the greatest student demand.

The three credits for three weekends Power Packages have been offered each semester since their inception in spring 1995. Although most of this study is based on the spring 1995 Power Package student cohort, additional research has been done on successive cohorts and is reflected in this report.

All the Power Package courses were taught by part-time instructors. There have been many questions on campus regarding the validity of this course configuration. During the planning process in December 1994, the full-time faculty were on break. When they returned in the spring semester, some were very concerned about the "pedagogical correctness" of the Power Packages. These full-time faculty voiced concern that power

pack students who take courses at the next level in the same discipline would be lost due to necessarily watered-down course content in the Power Package course.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the "three week-ends for three credits" Power Package course, the Research and Planning office used several different assessment methods. The study attempted to answer the following questions.

- Did we attract new students to BCC through this program?
- What types of students are likely to take a three week-end course?
- Were students satisfied with the three week-end configuration?
- Were the instructors satisfied with the three week-end configuration?
- How do students and the instructors rate the learning process in the weekend courses?
- What qualities do instructors need in order to be successful teaching these courses?
- Are some courses likely to be more successful than others as week-end courses?

In total, 185 students took at least one of the eleven week-end courses in the Spring 1995 semester. Approximately half (91) of these students were surveyed by phone. We also accessed mainframe data to determine student characteristics, including course grades. Third, instructors who taught the eleven courses were surveyed, some by phone, some in person, and some through the mail. Fourth, the student course evaluations were analyzed for these eleven courses and compared to course evaluations for the same course and same instructor in the traditional fifteen week mode. Finally, some instructors gave in-class surveys of their students. These instructors provided the Research office with copies of these surveys.

Analysis

The following courses were offered and ran as three credits for three week-ends in the spring 1995 semester:

Introduction to Art
US History I
US History II
Western Civilization
Introduction to Music
Physical Science I
Physical Science II
General Psychology
Developmental Psychology
Principles of Sociology
Wellness

Student Characteristics

Of all the students who enrolled in the week-end Power Package courses, the average age was 29 which is also the average age of all BCC students. Women comprised 59% of the students; 22% of the students were minority. In the total BCC population, women comprise 59% of the students and minorities comprise 24% of the students. For the returning or continuing students, there was a wide range in the number of accumulated credits; there was no one outstanding "type" of student based on accumulated credits.

New students were attracted to BCC by the Power Package. The following table lists the number and percentage of new students taking the Power Package courses in each semester they were offered. The percentage of new students increased in both summer semesters, leading to the tentative conclusion that students from four-year schools and universities are using this program to accumulate summer credit hours for transfer.

Power Package Students Who Were New to BCC

	New Students	Percentage of Total
Spring 1995	43	23%
Summer I 1995	8	36%
Summer II 1995	21	36%
Fall 1995	45	27%
Spring 1996	29	16%

In each semester other than Summer II 1995, at least one third of the students continued on for at least one more semester at BCC. These percentages are lower than the total percent who continue from one semester to the next, leading us to believe that many of the Power Package students are using the courses for goals external to BCC or are squeezing in one final course in order to graduate or to transfer.

New Students Who Continued On At BCC After the Power Package Course

Semester	New Students	Continuing
Spring 1995	43	21 (49%)
Summer I 1995	8	3 (38%)
Summer II 1995	21	3 (14%)
Fall 1995	45	16 (36%)

According to the results of the telephone survey, students enrolled in the Power Package courses for various reasons. As might be expected, slightly less than half of the students (45%) simply enrolled because they saw the courses as a quick way to earn credits. Similarly, another 25% said they needed to "get a course out of the way," be it in order to graduate, or to transfer the course to another institution. In addition, 15% of the

students said that their personal schedules do not allow them to take any other types of courses: day courses or evening courses. For family and/or work reasons, the week-end courses were their only option. Finally 5% of the students said that they were in the military and they never knew if they would be transferred to another site. This uncertainty makes it difficult for these students to enroll in a fifteen week course. The three week-end courses were perfect for them, and most mentioned that they really appreciated this opportunity. A few students (10%) gave other reasons for enrolling, such as not having money at the beginning of the semester or missing the regular registration deadline. One student said the winter week-ends are extremely boring and he needed something to do.

Student Satisfaction

For the most part, students were extremely satisfied with the Power Package three credits for three week-ends courses. When asked if they would enroll in another course, 89% said they would. Of the remaining 11%, three percent said it would depend on the course offerings. Only 8% said they would not enroll in another week-end course, and some of these students gave reasons such as that they were moving out of the county or were graduating. Thus far, approximately 11% of the students who have taken a Power Package have gone on to take another Power Package course. This percentage is much lower than the number who said they would take another course, but most of the course offerings thus far have been repetitive from semester to semester.

The students were asked if there were any benefits to taking the week-end courses, and, if so, what were the benefits? The following comments are examples of the responses we heard to this question.

> "I work full-time and am a mother. It's easier to make arrangements for child care for three week-ends than for fifteen weeks."
>
> "In the Power Package course there were no diversions; everyone was very focused."
>
> "My children liked it better that I was only gone three week-ends rather than once a week for fifteen weeks."
>
> "The fifteen week courses start to drag; a lot of time is wasted. The major points are covered in the Power Package and there is little wasted time."
>
> "In the Power Package course it is easy to stay motivated and interested."

"It's hard for adults to fit a fifteen week course into their schedules."

In addition to asking students what they believed to be the benefits of the Power Package courses, we also asked them for general comments about their satisfaction with the course. The following comments are representative of what we heard.

"The Power Package was great. It helped me fit in a class that I needed to graduate on time."

"Everyone in my power pack class was more focused on the topic and on learning."

"I learned more in the Power Package class because I was more focused."

"The course was tough, but manageable."

"The class was more work than I thought it would be."

"I get bored very easily but not in this class!"

"Classmates became like a family."

"The course was very intense, but worth it."

"The Power Package class really kept my attention."

"All the students' minds were really tuned in."

We also examined course evaluations. We compared course evaluations from the Power Package courses with evaluations from the same course taught by the same instructor in a fifteen week mode. There were no negative comments on these student evaluations regarding the structure of the Power Package. Some students complained about administrative aspects, such as the lack of heat, the unavailability of food, and the absence of window shades. In terms of "faculty scores," some instructors received higher scores in the Power Package mode, while others received higher scores in the fifteen week mode course.

Instructor Satisfaction

Of the ten instructors who taught the Power Package courses, eight were interviewed by the Research and Planning office. Some of the instructors were interviewed in person, some by phone, and some through the mail. Most of the faculty were extremely satisfied with teaching the course. Of the eight, seven said they would teach the Power Package course again. As one instructor put it, "Definitely, it was a great experience!" The instructor who said he would not teach it again, complained of the lack of typing, secretarial services, and photocopying services available on the week-end. Of the eleven instructors who taught in the first two semesters of the Power Package (Spring 1995 and Summer I 1995), eight (73%) have taught a Power Package course again in one of the subsequent semesters.

When asked what the college could do to improve the structure of the Power Package, each instructor had different ideas. One asked that more photocopying and typing services be available on the week-ends. A few mentioned that there needs to be more advertising done in a much earlier time-frame. One suggested stretching the course out over four week-ends with one week-end break in between. Another was concerned that the library closed at 4:00 on Sunday. Others said that the heat situation needed to be improved.

We also asked the instructors what type of feedback they received from their students. The instructors said,

> "Excellent feedback!"
>
> "Positive feedback."
>
> "At first, students were apprehensive about the amount of work in only three weeks. But this group was highly motivated and did very well. Student participation was fantastic."
>
> "Most students thought it was great."
>
> "Either the students love it or they'll never do it again. It's definitely for a special situation or a very motivated student."
>
> "Positive feedback. Most students got A's and B's; they were highly motivated."
>
> "Good feedback. Maybe two out of the eleven students were concerned that they might not learn as much."

We also asked the instructors if they would like to meet with others who have taught the Power Package before teaching again. Five of the eight were very interested in meeting with others and were also willing to meet with new instructors to give them tips before they teach this same type of course.

Teaching and Learning

When we surveyed the 91 students, we asked them if they thought they learned more, less, or the same amount in the Power Package as they did in other BCC courses. Slightly less than half (44%) said they learned the same amount in the Power Package course as they do in the traditional courses, 43% said they learned more in the Power Package course, and 13% said they learned less in the Power Package course.

In terms of interacting with the instructor and with their classmates, 66% of the students responded that they interacted more with both their classmates and their instructor in the Power Package courses than in the regular courses. Only 4% said they interacted less with their classmates and the instructor in the Power Package course; the remainder found the level of interaction to be the same.

> "The environment in the power package was cozy and intimate."
>
> "Great experience; very intense; great interaction among students and teacher."
>
> "I formed a bond with the students. In a typical 15 week semester, I hardly know anyone's name, but I knew everyone's name in the Power Package class."

Of all the students who said they interacted more with their classmates (n=57), 53% also said they learned more in the course (10% more than the entire group). Of all the students who said they interacted less or the same amount with their classmates (n=29) only 24% said they learned more in the course.

The students were also asked if they found the week-end course to be more difficult than the traditional fifteen week courses. Slightly more than half (55%) found the level of difficulty to be the same, 32% found the Power Package course to be more difficult, and 13% believe the fifteen week courses are more difficult. Several students mentioned that the class was more difficult than they thought it would be. An example of one class's assignments is presented below. Most instructors give their students at least one week after the last class meeting to turn in assignments.

Example of One Class's Assignments

- Clip 3 newspaper articles and summarize/analyze
- 2 quizzes
- 1 test
- 1 8-10 page research paper
- Complete a resume
- Group project with each individual completing a short paper

Of all the students who said the Power Package course was more difficult (n=27), 59% said they learned more in the Power Package. Of all the students who said it was less difficult or the same level of difficulty, only 36% said they learned more in the course.

Students were also relieved and impressed by the range of teaching methods used by the instructors.

> "I learned more than what I thought I would. I thought it would be a straight lecture, note taking and very strict rules. Instead, the teacher was very approachable, relaxed and encouraged group discussions. Because he did this, I learned more in three weekends, than in some of my classes in high school which I had for a year."
>
> "The variation in methods: lecture, video, group projects, group presentation, made a three weekend course less monotonous."
>
> "The art museum class trip was truly a "hands on" learning experience, highly recommended for all future classes."

We also asked students what qualities instructors should have in order to be effective in teaching in the week-end format. The following list presents the students' opinions on what instructor qualities equal a successful Power Package course.

1. Skilled in conducting small group activities
2. Flexible
3. Interesting
4. Concerned about students
5. Patient
6. Vibrant, exciting, stimulating
7. Comical
8. Well-organized, prepared, punctual
9. Able to speak quickly and clearly, quick moving
10. Strongly focused
11. Dedicated
12. Full of energy

Most of these qualities would be desirable in any instructor, but in the Power Package courses, students really want an instructor who is energetic ("full of energy, vibrant, exciting, stimulating, comical, able to speak quickly, quick moving...").

We also looked at students' grades. We compared the grades students received in the week-end Power Package courses with grades students received in the same course, taught by the same instructor, in a fifteen week format. Nine of the power package instructors had taught the same course in a fifteen week mode. Of those nine, seven gave more A's (as a percentage) in the Power Package courses. Furthermore, in each fifteen week course, at least two students received a grade lower than B. In six of the nine comparable Power Package courses, no students received a grade lower than a B.

Of the 185 students who took a Power Package course in the spring 1995 semester, nine took a subsequent course in the traditional format in the same discipline. Of those nine, four did the same or better in the subsequent course, four did worse in the subsequent course, and one student took two subsequent courses and did better in one and worse in the other. (In these cases, "worse" was often going from an A to a B, since most of the Power Pack grades were As.)

Students self-reported that they learned as much or more in their Power Package courses than in the traditional courses. Based on their comments, it is likely that the learning process was so successful for four reasons:

1. The students were very focused: they knew what they were getting into and they were ready to learn.
2. Students interacted more frequently with each other and with the instructor than they did in their traditional classes.
3. Students found the courses to be very difficult and challenging.
4. Instructors engaged various teaching methods to stimulate learning (lecture, video, group projects, group presentations, class trips, etc.).

Specific Suggestions for Success

The students surveyed had suggestions for improving the Power Package courses. Some suggested that the Power Package courses be offered at other sites such as Cinnaminson and Willingboro. A few students (four out of 91) mentioned that they would have preferred a week-end off in the middle of the Power Package. Others suggested that students register for the Power Package at the same time as registration for the regular courses so they do not have to drop a fifteen week course if they later find out about a Power Package course they would rather take. Some students also said that it was too hard to take a Power Package course in conjunction with other BCC courses; especially if they also worked and/or had children. Along those same lines, some students said that they could not handle taking two Power Package courses in the same semester.

Other students had preferences about the types of courses they would take as Power Package courses. Some said that "classes like Art" were better than "classes like Science." These students stressed that "simple" courses were better candidates for the Power Package. A few students said that they would not take courses in their major in the Power Package format. These comments were borne out in the fact that only five percent of the first cohort went on to take courses in the same discipline; suggesting that most students were not taking courses in their major in the Power Package format.

Conclusion

The staff members who created Power Package achieved the goal of recruiting new students to BCC. Surprisingly, 15% of the students surveyed said that they could not have taken courses in any other scheduling configuration. As the spring semester grew nearer, it became apparent that we would not, in fact, experience the significant decline we had been fearing. The Power Package was an important part of the efforts to increase the spring enrollment.

Based on feedback incidental to this study (from other focus groups, surveys and anecdotal information), the name "Power Package" is widely recognized in the community. By giving this program its own catchy name, we have established an identify that is easy to remember. When we advertise the Power Package, the mailings are sent to every resident in the County on a small, brightly colored postcard, which we believe has also helped in terms of attracting people and communicating to them.

On the whole, students were extremely satisfied with the alternative scheduling option. In general, faculty were satisfied as well as surprised by how motivated the students were. Most faculty and students believe that students learned at least as much in the Power Package courses as they do in the more traditional courses. Students told us that when they first enrolled for the course, they thought it would be an easy way to get three credits. Once the course started, they realized that it would be a lot of work. By the time the course ended, students said they had learned at least as much, if not more, than they had in their traditional courses. Students attributed this increased learning to the interaction with other students, the intensity of the learning process, the variety of teaching methods used, and the level of difficulty in the courses.

Despite the high levels of satisfaction from both student and instructor and the apparent success in learning levels, there is some concern that these courses do not cover the same amount of material as the traditional courses. Students made some comments along this vein.

> "Content-wise, we may have been only able to cover major points, but I really remember everything we covered."

"There is very little time in the power pack to pursue the areas in depth. It's great for gaining course credits, but I wouldn't take it again for something I had a real desire to explore."

"I feel that this material is too in-depth to be a power pack. There is not enough time to get a real understanding of this course."

When these comments are examined in light of all the students' comments, an "Intensity versus Content" argument emerges. As the first comment above states, students may not learn the same amount, but it is possible that through the intensity of the power pack, combined with the active learning in the class, students gain a more thorough and more long-lasting understanding of the material they do cover.

In the five semesters the Power Packages have been offered, the eight most successful courses (high enrollment and never canceled) have been:

1. Introduction to Art
2. US History I
3. Introduction to Music
4. Principles of Sociology
5. Developmental Psychology
6. Principles of Management
7. Fundamentals of Computer Science
8. Introduction to PCs with Windows

Conversely, the following four courses were canceled due to low enrollment each time they were offered:

1. The Modern Western World Since 1600
2. Interpretation of Fiction
3. Constitutional Law
4. Introduction to Theatre

Perhaps the Power Package structure works better for some courses than others, reflected by higher student evaluation scores in some Power Package courses than in the same course taught in a fifteen week mode. However, these differences could be due to the group dynamics, the preparation of the instructor, or other divers variables. In addition, perhaps some instructors thrive under the Power Package structure, while others are better suited to the regular course structure. Students also self-select which courses they want to take in a power pack format; many will not take courses in their major. The Research and Planning office will continue to monitor the success and viability of the Power Package courses.

Appendix A

Power Package Student Survey

Student Social Security Number: _____

Power Package course name and number: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from Burlington County College's Research office. The reason I'm calling you is that we are evaluating the success of our Power Package courses. I have a set of questions I'd like to ask you; it'll take about 10 minutes. Is that OK?

1. How did you find out about the Power Package courses? ***(let the student answer and then check one)***

(1) ___ Mailing to my home
(2) ___ Saw information on a BCC Bulletin Board
(3) ___ BCC employee told me about it
(4) ___ BCC student told me about it
(5) ___ Read about it in newspaper
(6) ___ Registration
(7) ___ Other, please explain: _____

2. Why did you choose to take a Power Package course?

_____

_____

_____

3. Before you signed up for the course, did BCC provide you with enough information to make a good decision on whether to enroll in the Power Package course?

(2) ___ Yes
(1) ___ No **If not, what more would you liked to have known prior to enrolling?**

_____

_____

4. Would you enroll in another Power Package course?

(2) ___ Yes
(1) ___ No

5. What are the benefits of taking a Power Package course as opposed to a course taught over 15 weeks?

_____

_____

_____

6. Did you learn...***(mark only one)***

(1) ___ more in the Power Package course than in most regularly taught courses?
(2) ___ less in the Power Package course than in most regularly taught courses?
(3) ___ the same in the Power Package course as most regularly taught courses?

7. Was the Power Package course...***(mark only one)***

(1) ___ more difficult than most regularly taught courses?
(2) ___ less difficult than most regularly taught courses?
(3) ___ the same level of difficulty as most regularly taught courses?

8. In your Power Package course, did you interact... ***(mark only one)***

(1) ___ more with your classmates than you usually do in class?
(2) ___ less with your classmates than you usually do in class?
(3) ___ the same amount with your classmates as you usually do in class?

9. In your Power Package course, did you interact... ***(mark only one)***

(1) ___ more with your instructor than you usually do in class?
(2) ___ less with your instructor than you usually do in class?
(3) ___ the same amount with your instructor as you usually do in class?

10. Did you feel there was enough time given for you to complete your course assignments?

(1) ___ Yes
(0) ___ No **If not, how much more time would you have liked?** _____

_____

11. What qualities do you think instructors should have in order to successfully teach a Power Package course?

_____

_____

_____

12. Please comment on the support services for the course. ***(If the student asks what you mean, give them examples: availability of refreshments, room temperature, etc.).***

_____

_____

_____

13. What types of adjustments/arrangements did you have to make in your personal life in order to take and complete this 3 week-end course?

_____

_____

_____

14. Other comments?:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you so much for your time. Your responses will really help us out as we make decisions about the Power Package program.

Appendix B
Faculty Survey

1. Did you have previous experience teaching short or compressed courses?

2. Would you teach another Power Pack course if the opportunity arose?

3. Would it be helpful for students to have the syllabus weeks ahead of time so they could buy the books and start reading if they wanted?

4. Would it be helpful if students could have an extra week after the class had stopped meeting to complete assignments?

5. What could the college administration do to improve the structure of the Power Pack?

6. What would you do differently next time you teach a Power Pack course?

7. What type of feedback did you get from students on the course?

8. We will be surveying students to discern their level of satisfaction with the Power Pack and ask them for suggestions. Are there questions you would like us to ask the students?

9. How did you count attendance? i.e. Did you count half days as full days?

10. Would it be helpful for you to meet with others who also taught a Power Pack course before you teach another one? Would you be willing to talk to/give advice to others who want to teach a Power Pack course?